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Playing to Mean and Meaning to Play: A n Examination of the Game between the Poet and His Audience in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"

Judy Cicatko

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

PLAYING TO MEAN AND MEANING TO PLAY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE GAME BETWEEN THE POET AND HIS AUDIENCE IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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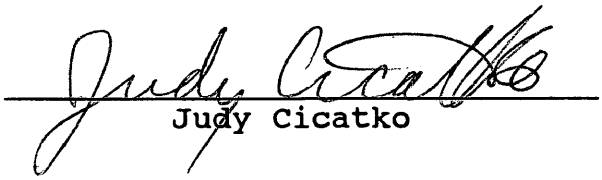

Judy Cicatko

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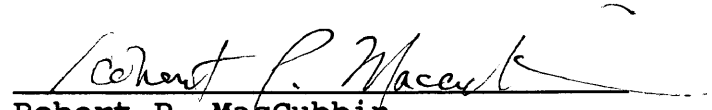
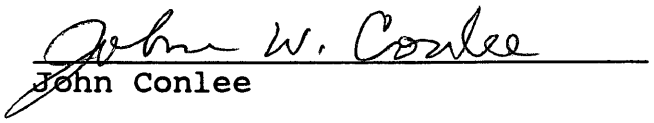
Monica Brzezinski



Robert P. MacCubbin



John Conlee

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as a game between the poet and the reader. The reader's goal in this game is to construct, through interpretation, a unified pattern of meaning which will not only make sense of the poem but provide it with moral significance. Readers play the game by interpreting symbols, characters, and scenes 1) by inferring analogies from structural or iconic similarities between these elements, and/or 2) by contextualizing these elements within a larger tradition. The game's playing field consists of both the literal text of the poem and the vertical levels of meaning which the reader constructs through interpretation.

The poet plays along with the reader's desire for meaning but at the same time challenges the construction of any unified interpretation of the poem's moral. He does this by providing a wealth of interpretive possibilities in his game, since its horizontal matter, that is, the literal content of the poem, contains much room for vertical, or thematic, play. The potential the poet creates serves two major functions: It allows for many meaningful possibilities which make a coherent reading of the poem available; it also provides too many meanings so that the burden of understanding weighs heavily on the reader. In other words, the poet's interpretive game, because of its wealth of possibility, places responsibility on the reader for sifting through the choices which conventional interpretation can find in the poet's matter. The poet's game thus educates the reader to his role in the literary game, and to the rules which govern that role. It offers the reader not merely the meaning of the poem, but a lesson in interpretation which educates the reader to the ways in which he or she makes meaning.

The centrality of the green girdle illustrates one scheme of unity through which the poet enables the reader to play with various interpretive possibilities. The girdle links the various games in the plot to each other, and provides the focus for the meaning of Gawain's quest as a whole. It is a challenge to interpret since it functions in the poem as a somewhat conventional object, then as a symbol meaning different things to different characters. Readers, thus, must determine the meaning of the girdle and of Gawain's quest by choosing from a variety of interpretive moves, moves which ultimately affect the poem's moral, or the goal of their game. In this way the reader's interpretive moves lead them, in a sense, to eventually define their own goal.

PLAYING TO MEAN AND MEANING TO PLAY:

AN EXAMINATION OF THE GAME BETWEEN THE POET AND HIS AUDIENCE

IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Though we can be certain of little regarding the identity of the poet who wrote Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, we do know he was fond of games: much of the setting, tone and activity of this medieval poem revolves around the games which characters play. Many critics have analyzed these games and the concept of "play" as structural and thematic aspects of the poem. Generally, however, they have studied only the games which characters play within the narrative--the beheading match between the Green Knight and Gawain, the exchange between Bercilak and Gawain, and the courtly play between the lady and Gawain, for example.[1] Such a focus does not consider a game which incorporates all of these, that is, the game between the poet and the reader. In SGGK, the poet challenges the reader in a game of interpretation whose end, or goal, is to discover the work's meaning. Robert J. Blanch is one of the few critics to approach a holistic view of the poem as game, through exploring the poet's use of colors in descriptions of characters' clothing and armor. According to Blanch, the audience in an attempt to understand the poem's thematic implications, interprets the poet's use of colors according to the colors' traditional moral connotations. As Blanch concludes, the audience's effort to interpret the poem in this conventional way results in a variety of possible meanings which can be so confusing as to keep the reader "teetering between ignorance and knowledge" (67), that is, knowledge of the correct meaning: the poem's moral. Blanch,

however, ignores the possibility that, in a poetic game like SGGK, ambiguity may function as a means to meaning. A more recent study by Thomas L. Reed also attempts to define the poet's game as ultimately an ambiguous one. Taking Blanch's point a step further, Reed concludes that the reader does not achieve meaning by engaging in the poet's game, but instead gains merely a "temporary escape from the serious and consequential choices of moral life" (153).

When one views the poetic game as a whole, the poem's ambiguity does not afford merely an escape or evasion of seriousness, as Reed mistakenly deduces, but instead represents the poet's way of exercising the interpretive skills of his audience. The ambiguity forms part of the largest and most important game for the reader of SGGK, the literary game, the playful interaction between the poet and the audience set in motion by the challenging interpretive potential which the poem affords. This game's rules conform to the medieval reader's understanding that texts are multi-layered. A reader of medieval secular literature inherited the multi-leveled approach devised by much earlier readers who were concerned with interpreting the Bible. These exegetes interpreted the Bible in a way which distinguished the literal text from its meaning. They ascribed to a variety of interpretive schemes, the most common of which concerns itself with removing the "veil" from the letter to reach three different levels of meaning: allegorical,

tropological, and anagogical.[2] The most important level for the reader was the tropological, or moral, level which, as James W. Earl explains, imposed "a moral imperative on the individual" (17).

The multi-leveled approach to texts moved into the secular realm, as Eugene Vinaver argues, with the advent of the great French romancers. His studies of Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes argue that these authors advertised that their texts possessed meaning beyond the literal plot of fantasy and adventure. They indicate that the text's meaning, discovered through interpretation, is more important than its literal storyline. Vinaver discusses Marie de France's vocabulary concerning meaning: Matiere, the text's matter or plot, is important only as a means to reach sen (or in Middle English, sentence) which is the meaning. Sentence is the goal which the author intends the reader to reach. Vinaver explains that, according to these authors, a literary work's success depends upon "the discovery of meaning implicit in the matter" (16). Chretien de Troyes, the chief auctor[3] of French romance, also includes a self-conscious attention to the meaning beneath the matter in his narratives (Vinaver 23).

The discovery of meaning represents a reason for playing the literary game. Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale expresses how a work's meaning is, in fact, its moral. Near the conclusion of the tale Chaucer writes:

> But ye that holden this tale a foyle
> As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
> Taketh the moralitee, goode men.
> For Saint Paul saith that al that writen is
> To oure doctrine it is ywrit, ywis;
> Taketh the fruit, and lat the chaf be stille.
> (618-23)

Chaucer's words instruct the reader to interpret the literal tale in terms of its moral lesson. The "fruit," or meaning, is the tale's moral. Chaucer stresses the part the reader plays in determining that moral in the prologue to The Miller's Tale, an anti-romance in which he warns readers that they may find a moral which is not intended, and thereby make "earnest out of game:"

> Turne over the leef, and chese another tale
> For he shal finde ynowe, grete and smale,
> Of storial thing that toucheth gentilesse,
> And eek moralitee and holinesse:
> Blameth nought me if that ye chese amis.
> . . . . . .
> Aviseth you, and putte me out of blame:
> And eek men shal nought maken earnest out of game.
> (69-73, 77-78)

In these lines Chaucer not only indicates that the reader may choose from among his various tales, but that in reading those tales he may find morality in all of them, even if their teller did not intend it. Chaucer, like the French romancers, acknowledges that his fictions can serve a moral purpose, and that the reader determines the moral from interpreting the tale, that is, determining its sentence.

Similarly, in the modern work Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages, Glending Olson argues that secular literature had a moral purpose.[4] He describes it in terms

of the classical definition, that it instructs by delighting. Olson explains, "Recreation involves some kind of activity which creates physical refreshment or mental quies through delectatio, thereby reinvigorating the psyche. It is thus possible for recreational activities to be seen as remedies against idleness" (Olson 103). Such an understanding of the virtues of recreation leads to a conception of secular literature as a valuable diversion; if it "reinvigorates the psyche" by its capacity to delight, this is good. If it provides moral instruction, this is better. Olson examines the sources of the medieval theory which support the "notion of a pleasing fiction as sugarcoating the pill of moral truth," an idea which underscores "the process of moving from surface to depths, by virtue of one's having to think through the allegorical implications" (35-6). Though, as these quotes from Olson show, the various authorities may disagree upon whether meaning is above, below, within or around the matter, they all insist on a distinction between the two, and they all consider the meaning to have a serious purpose.

Although text consists of both matter and sentence, the two are not on equal footing. Their relationship is hierarchical to the medieval reader, with the matter below the meaning, subordinate to it. Medieval society ascribed to a belief in an ordered, hierarchical univers. D.W. Robertson Jr. draws attention to this medieval tendency to

"think in terms of symmetrical patterns, characteristically arranged with reference to an abstract hierarchy," a mode of thought distinct from the modern scheme which defines oppositions "whose dynamic interaction leads to a synthesis" (6). Vinaver supports this generalization and adds that one hierarchy often stood for another. He asserts that, to the medieval reader, interpretation was based on "the belief that the universe formed an ordered structure of such a kind that the pattern of the whole was reproduced in the pattern of the parts, and that inferences from one category of phenomena to the other were valid methods of approach for understanding either" (100). Medieval society ascribed to a belief in an ordered, hierarchical universe. From rock to angel, each creature had its place above one and below another. Man was believed to partake of both the animal and the spiritual. As C.S. Lewis explains, man is the "little world," having senses in common with animals and understanding in common with angels. According to this hierarchy, reason reigns over the senses. In other words, spirit presides over matter.[5] In the reader's game, an appropriate analogy determines that sentence presides over the text's matter, since sentence depends on the reader's understanding or reason. To make sense of the literary game, and thereby attain sentence, the medieval reader constructs hierarchical relationships that design a mental ladder reaching from matter to meaning.

The reader builds this ladder from the many hierarchical patterns which he may construct through interpretation. As W.R.J. Barron indicates, a hierarchical relationship exists between the "realm of the sensible" and "another realm available through interpretation of the sensible."[6] The reader's task in SGGK is to move from the former to the latter by way of analogy. A reader's ability to interpret allows her to create levels of meaning for the text associated with but not confined to its entertaining matter. The matter, which includes all the elements in the narrative and their relationship to each other in the storyline, is, in Barron's terms, the "sensible" through which the reader ascertains "another realm." The reader constructs his own vertical play through interpretation, moving in all directions from the horizontal plane, depending on the way he interprets. In this vertical area of interpretation, the reader steps out of the horizontal flow of the narrative in order to combine and recombine elements in the poem's matter in ways which make thematic sense, and eventually sentence, out of the game.

In SGGK, the poet has chosen matter rich in interpretive potential for his game, and thereby creates a challenging quest for meaning. By playing the game, readers recognize the possibilities and confront the limitations of the interpretive rules upon which they rely. They learn that interpretive rules can be both a key to and a lock on

the door to meaning. The goal becomes not just an understanding of the poem, but a self-conscious look at the process through which one reaches that understanding. In several ways the poet manipulates conventional rules to create a game of many-leveled play: He incorporates Biblical exegesis in explicating Gawain's shield; he includes elements which test the reader's understanding of history and romance through the relationship which his matter creates between the two genres and within the latter; he designs the girdle and the shield as symbols with ambiguous implications; he complicates the reader's understanding of Gawain by allowing that hero unconventional characteristics; and, finally, he includes more than one explanation of Gawain's quest. All of these moves on the poet's part allow the game to both employ the meaning-making strategies of the conventional medieval reader and examine them.

In his treatment of the pentangle on Gawain's shield, the poet himself performs, in his text, the kind of interpretation he expects his reader to perform. This performance provides an example for his reader to imitate. It also presents the limitations of this particular interpretive convention. The poet interprets the pentangle by appealing to the tradition of Biblical exegesis. He describes the pentangle's significance:

Hit is a synge that Salamon set sumwhyle,

> In betokyng of trauthe by tytle that hit habbes
> (lines 625-6).

Conventionally, Solomon is associated with a pentangle.[7] The poet presents the pentangle on the shield as a token of truth historically attributed to Solomon the Wise. After associating the pentangle on Gawain's shield with Solomon, the poet explicates the significance of the pentangle's five points. He describes five virtues which represent Gawain's faultlessness in his five "wyttes" and "fyngeres," and compares these with the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of the Virgin Mary. Finally, he specifically associates the symbol with Gawain's virtues:

> Was fraunchyse and felawschip forbe all thing,
> His clannes and his cortaysye croked were never,
> And pity, that passes all poyntes: these pure fyve
> Were harder happed on that hathel then on any other.
> (652-5)

This association of Gawain with the pentangle is unconventional, as no other romance gives him this heraldic device. By making use of conventional and unconventional associations in this way, the poet makes use of one convention--Biblical exegesis--to create a larger, unconventional relationship between Gawain and the shield which requires that the reader solve the problem on the vertical level of the game. The audience must consider how alike or different these two characters are, and indeed what the terms of comparison between them are in the first place.

The poet's treatment of the shield, with its

problematic relationship to Gawain, demonstrates how even a lengthy explanation of an image provided in the matter cannot contain the whole meaning. The shield passage presents an example of explication which the reader should imitate. However, the explication also makes room for many other possibilities which the poet leaves unsolved in his matter. The passage thus requires that the reader take the matter into the more challenging area of vertical play in the literary game if she is to see how it functions in the poem as a whole. Color symbolism represents one strategy for such vertical play. Robert J. Blanch examines the shield according to this strategy. His discussion of the colors red, green, gold, and white in the poem explores their traditional significance to the medieval reader.[8] For instance, Blanch discusses the color red as appropriate to royalty, since it is linked with both Christian virtues and physical prowess. Gold, another of the shield's colors, signifies faith and constancy, emphasizing spiritual virtues. In combination, the two imply both spiritual and physical strength, and afford an ideal standard with which to compare the shield's bearer (Blanch 74). According to Blanch, the reader interprets through means of the color code in SGGK, uncovering the analogous relationship between the poet's use of particular colors and the use of those colors in other familiar literature. Already, the poet's horizontal explication becomes partial as the shield enters

the vertical level of play through color symbolism. In essence, the literal explication, however involved, encourages rather than alleviates the audience's interpretive task.

Indeed, from the first line of the poem, the poet requires the audience to reach beyond his matter to disclose the full significance of the poem. Specifically, the poet arranges the literal matter of the poem's opening in a way which invites the audience's participation in this vertical area of literary play, allowing them to enter the narrative's thematic levels at the same time they enter the narrative. The poem opens with a brief description of Britain's history, conventionally understood to begin with Troy, and proceeds to a setting in the Arthurian court, the conventional starting point for a romance. Though the poem's opening matter addresses the history of Britain in a broad sense by beginning with its founding fathers on the continent, and proceeds to narrow its focus to the fantastic realm of the Arthurian court, the effect is to expand rather than confine the matter's thematic implications. The poet juxtaposes two genres, history and fantasy, whose interrelationship was deemed problematic. On the one hand, chroniclers considered the Arthurian court historical. On the other hand, critics of the chroniclers considered it to be fictitious.[9] Thus, the poet creates an analogy between the historic world and its hero, Aeneas, and the fantastic

world of the court and its hero, Gawain, an analogy whose implications are left to the reader to interpret.

In other words, in the vertical area of the game, the poem's opening provides interpretive possibilities by presenting historic images in combination with the poem's fantastic setting, that is, King Arthur's court.[10] The poet creates a narrative journey through the fact and tragedy of history to the "outtrage" and "aventure" of the Arthurian court:

> Ay was Arthur the hendest, as I have herd telle.
> Forthy an aunter in erde I attle to schewe,
> That a selly in sight sum men hit holden
> And an outtrage aventure of Arthures wonderes. (26-29)

The poet thus prefaces his tale with the abbreviated account of historic "tales," despite the fact that history does not correspond, in the medieval mind, with fantasy. Both the serious world of history and the fantastic realm of the Arthurian court represent elements in the medieval audience's literary tradition. In employing conventional elements from literature familiar to his audience, the poet allows intertextuality to play a part in his game. The reader may compare the poet's treatment of the Arthurian court with that of other romances as part of the interpretive game. He may also compare Gawain's adventure to those of history's heroes.

The opening also specifically aligns Aneas and Gawain on the vertical level of the game by the implication of its

first five lines. These lines contain an interesting detail regarding the status of the historic hero, Aeneas:

> Sithen the sege and the assaut was sesed at Troye,
> The burgh brittened and brent to brondes and askes--
> The tulk that the trammes of tresoun there wrought
> Was tried for trecherye, the truest on erthe--
> Hit was Ennias the athel and his high kynde (1-5).

An invocation of Troy and the mention of Aeneas are conventional to the opening of many medieval poems, one example being Winner and Waster. Here, however, the poet's treatment of Aeneas deserves a closer look. While the poet employs historic references to provide a conventional, historic context for the poem, he immediately complicates the serial-like references to Aeneas, Romulus (8), and "Felix Brutus" (13), with a subtle contradiction regarding the first of these heroes: Aeneas is both "tried for trecherye" and "the truest on erthe." This problematic depiction of Aeneas provides a context for Gawain's adventure which calls into question the status of a conventional hero. Thus, the historic references which open the poem offer the audience both factual matter and a thematic dilemma: Was Aeneas true? And how does this affect our perception of Gawain? Is Gawain, as the opening implies, somehow like Aeneas?

The opening acquires yet more vertical play when the reader compares it with the similar series of images which close the poem. After concluding Gawain's adventure, the

narrative recedes from the Arthurian court, through British history, back to Troy:

> Thus in Arthures day this aunter bitidde,
> The Brutus bokes therof beres wyttenesse.
> Sithen Brutus the bold burn bowed hider first,
> After the sege and the assaut was sesed at Troye
> (2522-25).

The poet throws the audience a curve by ending where he began, allowing his poem to form a circle. This instructs the reader, as she finishes the poem, to return to the beginning in order to fully negotiate the poem's meaning and thereby complete her game.[11] The ending acquires a thematic level beyond the beginning, however, as it proceeds more dramatically into a serious realm with the closing comments:

> Now that bere the croun of thorne,
> He bryng us to his blysse. (2529-30)

These lines impart the seriousness of salvation history. Thus, the poet combines the seriousness of history, the morality of religion, and the fun of fantasy as elements in his game. By creating a narrative which places history, fantasy, and religion on a continuum, as part of one continuous circle, the poet's matter implies the intimate relationship between these elements.

Readers seeking <u>sentence</u> pursue a series of interpretive, or vertical, moves hoping to achieve a meaning as coherent as the poem's literal structure. Their interpretive game is necessary to thematically unify the poem. They explore the possible meanings available through

their conventional interpretive strategies, choose some, reject others, and ultimately establish a particular meaning that they may apply to the serious side of their affairs when the literary game is done. This goal of one meaning was theoretically quite plausible to the medieval reader (much more so than to the post-modern reader). As the literary game of SGGK reveals, however, conventional interpretation has its limits. The poet's explanations, symbolic resonance, the reader's intertextual knowledge--these strategies both compose and complicate the reader's game of establishing sentence.

The girdle provides fitting focus for an examination of the complexity of the reader's challenge. The girdle is not authoritatively explicated in the poem as the shield is. Readers therefore need to perform their own explication on the vertical level to determine the significance of the girdle. The poet describes the girdle's appearance in great detail as the lady gives it to Gawain, but does not offer an interpretation of its symbolic value as he did with the shield:

> Ho laght a lace lyghtly that leke umbe hir sides,
> Knit upon hir kyrtel under the clere mantyle--
> Gered hit was with grene silk and with gold schaped,
> Noght bot arounde brayden, beten with fyngeres
> (1830-33).

Several lines later, the lady explains the girdle's function:

> 'For what gome so is gurde with this grene lace,
> While he hit had hemely halched aboute,

> There is no hathel under heven tohewe him that myght,
> For he myght not be slayne for slyght upon erthe.'
> (1851-54)

The lady describes the girdle's function, not the poet. This distinction in point of view causes readers to hesitate in assigning the lady's meaning to the girdle, because they know nothing about the lady other than that she is Bercilak's wife, and that she approaches Gawain in his bedroom, without reserve. Her credibility is thus very much at issue in the interpretive game. At the point of the girdle's introduction, the lady's authority is not as secure as that of the narrator who explicates the shield. To add to the ambiguity, the poet refrains from revealing her part in Morgan le Faye's plot until late in the poem.

To negotiate the girdle, the audience may rely on their intertextual knowledge. In other words, readers may incorporate any knowledge which they possess regarding a similar symbol in other literature, myth, or folklore. Albert B. Friedman and Richard H. Osberg examine traditional literary associations for the girdle in a discussion of the girdle's actual uses and mythological significance in medieval society. Their study indicates that the poet's neglect in elaborating an authoritative explication for the girdle is provocative in light of the traditional associations of this object. They explain that according to classical legend and Celtic folklore, a girdle was originally worn "not for warmth or ornament but as a magical

binding... as a protective amulet" (303). This function resembles that of the girdle in the poem, since the lady states that the girdle's power protects its wearer from death.

Literary legend and folklore also generally associate a girdle with a woman's sexuality. Girdles were often signs of virginity, and were given away with it: "The girdle was the husband's trophy" (Friedman and Osberg 305). Considering these conventional literary implications for the girdle, these critics offer the medieval reader's possible assumption regarding the lady's gift to Gawain: "[A] medieval courtly audience would have running vaguely in the back of its mind the common pattern of a questing hero who, unlike Gawain [in SGGK], has fulfilled an amorous encounter with a goddess, nymph, fairy, princess, or mere lady" (307-8). As the literal matter attests, Gawain has not "fulfilled an amorous encounter" with Bercilak's wife. Thus, the reader encounters a conventional symbol which does not fulfill all of its conventional implications since it represents neither a gift for sex nor a token of sexual virtue. The poet's treatment of this symbol highlights the difficulty which the audience encounters when they employ conventional strategies of interpretation. The poet's horizontal play uses convention to create tension: the girdle offers too many possibilities for readers causing their vertical moves to contradict each other.

The girdle gains more vertical play as the poem progresses. What begins as a gift with ambiguous conventional associations evolves into an emblem worn by Gawain and finally by the court. As the poem nears its close, the audience wrestles not only with the conventional implications of the gift, but with its new significance as a part of Gawain's arms. Gawain decides to take the girdle only after the lady tells him it will save his life. Previously, however, Gawain has agreed to give his host Bercilak everything he gains each day, and in return Bercilak will give Gawain the spoils from his day's hunt. Gawain, in order to save his own life in the beheading game, conceals the girdle from Bercilak. He violates "trawthe," one of the virtues of his shield. As Gawain leaves Bercilak's castle, the girdle takes its place in his arms along with the shield. Gawain chooses to employ both the girdle and the shield as defense against the Green Knight. By combining the two symbols in this way the poet opens up a variety of interpretive moves for the audience.

The girdle and the pentangle, as they function both horizontally and vertically, challenge readers in a way which exposes the limits of the rules of their game. Combining the two symbols as Gawain faces the final round of his most perilous game, the poet encourages the audience to negotiate a relationship between the two. The two descriptions of Gawain's arming, one near the beginning and

one near the end, provide a particularly lucid example. In each of these two scenes, the shield and the girdle are prominent articles in Gawain's arms. In this way the poet creates a horizontal matter which encourages and requires the reader to negotiate the implications of a vertical similarity between the two symbols. In the first arming, the poet describes the shield at the point where Gawain acquires it:

> Then thay schewed him the schelde, that was of schyre goules
> With the pentangel depaynt of pure gold hewes;
> He braydes hit by the bauderyk, aboute the halses castes.
> That bisemed the segge semlyly fayr (619-22).

In other words, the shield stands out, its gold pentangle against a bright red background. It hangs by Gawain's "bauderyk," or baldric, and is the last and most prominent item of Gawain's arms. Later, as Gawain leaves Bercilak's castle in search of the Green Knight, the poet emphasizes the girdle most in his description of Gawain's arms:

> Yet laft he not the lace, the ladies gift--
> That forgat not Gawayn for good of himselven.
> By he had belted the bronde upon his balwe haunches,
> Then dressed he his drury double him aboute
> Swythe swethled umbe his swange swetely that knight.
> The girdel of the grene silk that gay wel bisemed,
> Upon that ryal red clothe that rich was to schewe.
> (2030-36)

In this case Gawain wraps the girdle around his waist twice. The poet describes the "grene silk" against the "ryal red clothe" of Gawain's coat-armor, situating the girdle against a red background as he had the pentangle in the first

arming. A servant hands him the shield, several lines later in the poem, an action which receives merely casual mention. In essence, the girdle has replaced the shield in the second arming. The poet's manipulation of the symbols in this way requires that the audience consider not only the earlier explication of the shield, but the girdle as well, and more importantly, the relationship of each symbol to its bearer, Gawain.

W.R.J. Barron offers one interpretation of the parallel:

> Both [descriptions of Gawain's arming] suggest the social standing of the knight in the richness of his arms and moral stature through their conventional symbolism, but the former gives pride of place to the heraldic badge, the pentangle, which proclaims his personal code of perfection, on which in the latter, the green girdle, symbol of his imperfection, is superimposed. (EMR 20-1; emphasis added)[12]

Barron's statement indicates the interpretive challenge these two symbols, in their respective functions as parts of Gawain's arms, present to the reader. The two symbols are analogous in the literal level of the text since they both "protect" Gawain, but the nature of that protection creates a distinction between the source and strength of each symbol's power. The shield protects Gawain in physical combat, but also represents the strength of Christian virtue

which should protect him in moral combat. The girdle's power is much more ambiguous. Rather than possessing a Christian significance, the girdle contains magical power distinct from that associated with God. The reader decides through his vertical moves, as Barron has, why the poet creates an analogy between the two symbols. The poet's similar treatment of the two in the horizontal game makes this a difficult vertical move for the reader to make.

Since Gawain wears the girdle to his final confrontation with the Green Knight, it plays a part in all of Gawain's games. The girdle's significance at the end of the poem requires the audience to negotiate not only the initial ambiguity of the lady's gift, but its effect on the meaning of the shield, its meaning to Gawain, and its meaning to the court. This list is by no means exhaustive. Thus, when the reader finishes reading, she continues her vertical game by looking back on the moves she has already made so that she may determine the poem's moral, and thereby achieve the goal of the literary game. To achieve <u>sentence</u>, the audience must not only decipher the horizontal level of the game, but must choose from a variety of interpretive possibilities, and create the vertical levels necessary to draw the poem, and game, to a close. In conflating conventional explanations for his matter, the poet adds more ground to the vertical playing area.

As any critic's work on SGGK will testify, to determine the poem's moral, one must determine the meaning of the girdle. This symbol forms the thread which the reader follows through the poem's design. It links the poem's various parts into a unified whole. This pattern is based on the relationship between the games which Gawain plays, all of which, to some degree, concern the girdle. While on the horizontal level, the girdle appears rather late in the story, it thematically joins the conversational game between Gawain and the lady, the exchange agreement between Gawain and Bercilak, and Gawain's most perilous game with the Green Knight. The reader negotiates the pattern in order to decipher its moral design for his game. One way to do this is first to determine the relationship between the games in the text to each other; second, to determine the significance of this relationship to Gawain's entire quest; lastly, to consider the relationship of Gawain's game to the literary game. Specifically, the reader will complete three tiers of interpretive negotiation: 1) the relationship between the games between Gawain and Bercilak, Gawain and the lady, and the hunt; 2) the relationship of these three games to Gawain's larger game--the beheading match between Gawain and the Green Knight; and 3) the relationship of the outcome of number two to the reader's game of determining a moral applicable to his own life. The first two are based

mainly on horizontal matters. The last move contains considerable "vertical" freedom.

The poet provides a convenient starting point for this complicated endeavor by including two basically contradictory "readings" of the girdle, and consequentially of the poem, in the matter. Resolving this large thematic dilemma requires readers to take into account many of their smaller interpretive moves. I will first present the contradiction as it appears in the matter, then discuss how it affects the reader's game on each interpretive tier. Close to the poem's ending, as Gawain returns to the Arthurian court, the poet describes how and why Gawain wears the girdle:

> And the blykkande belt he bere theraboute
> Abelef as a bauderyk bounden by his side,
> Loken under his lyft arme, the lace, with a knot,
> In tokenyng he was tan in tech of a faut (2485-88).

In these lines, the girdle contains the significance which Gawain afforded it, that is, it is a token of his sin. Several lines later, the poet counters this description with the court's reaction to Gawain and the girdle, and their agreement that

> Uch burn of the brotherhede, a bauderyk schulde have,
> A bende abelef him aboute of a bryght grene,
> And that for sake of that segge in sute to were.
> For that was acorded the renoun of the Rounde Table
> And he honoured that hit had evermore after (2516-20).

Here, what Gawain wears as a sign of a flaw, the court adopts as a sign of his heroism. In the second tier the

reader encounters a contradiction between what Gawain's entire quest means to him and what it means to Arthur and the court. Which meaning, sin or heroism, the readers choose as the meaning of the text's literal matter influences the way they approach the third tier, or their own goal of sentence, the lesson to be learned from their game. In order to examine the last tier, we must accompany the reader through the other two.

To begin with, a complicated relationship exists between the games on the first tier of the interpretive challenge. A wealth of criticism exists which examines the poet's masterful interweaving of the games in the central segments of the poem--that is, the hunt, the exchange between Gawain and Bercilak, and the courtly game between Gawain and the lady. For instance, some critics explore the analogy between Gawain and the hunted animals implied by the interlace of the various days of Bercilak's hunting and the simultaneous courtly love affair (what is generally referred to as the temptation scenes) between the lady and Gawain. The hunt and the courtly love affair shed further light on the reader's game since both activities may be seen as games which follow conventional rules. In this sense, they are analogous to the reader's game. As Martin Stevens attests, "[B]oth of these types of games [the hunt, courtly love] were elaborately codified in the Middle Ages, each with its own manuals of instruction."[13] Stevens also notes that

while the poet conforms in detail to the guides of traditional manuals in his descriptions of the hunting scenes, he reverses conventional male and female roles when describing the courtly love game (72-74). According to the conventional manual on courtly love, Andreas Capellanus' The Art of Courtly Love, the man pursues the woman according to a strict code of behavior and conversation. In SGGK, however, the lady pursues Gawain. The poet thus both appeases and refutes the conventional expectations of his readers in his handling of these two horizontal games.

In essence, the courtly love game between Gawain and the lady does not follow conventional rules. The lady pursues, and Gawain resists. In SGGK, thus, the poet challenges the audience to interpret a Gawain who does not conform to his literary reputation. The Gawain of traditional romance literature, famous for his courtly manners and specifically for his way with the ladies, finds himself in a peculiar position in SGGK. As one critic's study of Gawain's literary reputation summarizes, "[I]n the romances, prose as well as verse, Gawain is the casual, good-natured and well-mannered wooer of almost any available girl" (Whiting 74). Readers familiar with the Gawain of medieval romance find their conventional standards for evaluating Gawain inappropriate.

The poet further complicates the reader's interpretive moves by designing an intricate web of rules which connect

Gawain's apparently distinct games in Bercilak's castle to each other. The most crucial connection, and that which brings the girdle into play, exists between the bedroom game and Gawain's exchange game with Bercilak, the lady's husband. Gawain agrees to a fair exchange of winnings in his game with his host, Bercilak: Gawain must relinquish anything he gains during each day to Bercilak, as likewise, Bercilak offers Gawain his spoils from the hunt. It is not one game or the other, therefore, which complicates Gawain's situation, but the relationship between them, a relationship he must necessarily deduce in order to understand the implications of his larger quest involving the Green Knight. The apparently simple exchange game between Bercilak and Gawain thus bears directly upon the interaction between Gawain and the lady and upon Gawain's larger quest. In this way, even the deceptively harmless game of courtly love between the lady and Gawain weighs heavily upon the outcome of Gawain's ultimate quest. This pattern of part to whole which joins the smaller games on the first tier with Gawain's larger quest on the second tier proves analogous to the relationship which readers infer between the meaning of Gawain's quest and the meaning of their game: even the smallest interpretive move affects the goal.

As Gawain moves through the narrative, he gradually discovers how his superficially distinct games fit together. Gawain attempts to follow the rules of his various games,

and the reader attempts to interpret Gawain's moves by conventional methods. Both Gawain and the reader discover that often these conventional rules contradict each other. Gawain's dilemma comes from his involvement in two somewhat contradictory games--his courtly game with the lady and his friendly game with Bercilak. The first requires that he accept the girdle as a token, the second requires that he give that girdle to Bercilak. He obeys one rule and breaks the other. Like Gawain, the reader struggles to determine the bearing of one interpretive move upon the other, strives to obey the rules, and finds that this is not always possible or productive.

The reader's choice, like Gawain's, is to decide which rules to follow and which to break. On the first tier, within the bedroom game, Gawain first feels he must break the rules of his courtly manners in order to be faithful to the rules of his exchange game with Bercilak. More seriously, on the next tier containing the larger horizontal game of the Green Knight's challenge, Gawain obeys the rules of courtly love in accepting the love token, but breaks the rules of his exchange with Bercilak in order to keep the girdle and preserve his life. On the third tier which judges the whole of Gawain's quest, therefore, the reader must decide whether Gawain is justified in either of these instances of rule-breaking, in order to discern the meaning of the whole poem. As a result of such difficulty, readers

must choose carefully in constructing vertical relationships between the elements in the poem's matter for the sake of succeeding in their larger game. Robert G. Cook offers a perceptive summary of the interrelationship between the horizontal games which helps clarify the analogy between Gawain's games and the reader's: "The outcome of the beheading game depends on the exchange of winnings, and the exchange of winnings depends on Gawain's success in the bedroom game" (25-6). Analogously, the outcome of the audience's game depends on their interpretation of the beheading game, which depends in turn on their interpretation of Gawain's "success" in the bedroom game, that is, the obtainment of the girdle.

Readers may interpret Gawain's "success" in the bedroom game in a variety of ways, all of which depend upon how they interpret the girdle's significance. To negotiate the second tier, or the whole of Gawain's challenge, the audience must consider the girdle in its initial setting, then as it pertains to Gawain, and finally as it functions in the outcome of the poem as a whole. Most readings of the poem conform to a conventional religious interpretation which generally judges Gawain's acceptance of the girdle as a violation of "trauthe" and a sign of Gawain's cupidinous love for life, both of which are sinful in the context of the virtues which Gawain, as a Christian and a knight, should represent.[13] Gawain's own description of the

symbolic value of the girdle supports this view on the horizontal level:

> 'Bot in syngne of my surfet I schal se hit oft,
> When I ride in renoun remorde to myselven
> The faut and the fayntyse of the flesche crabbed,
> How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylthe;
> And thus, when pryde schal me prik for prowes of armes,
> The loke to this luf-lace schal lethe my hert.'
> (2433-8)

The explanation comes from Gawain's mouth. Since the poet cleverly abstains from an authoritative evaluation of Gawain, readers must also consider the other views of Gawain's quest present in the poem's matter.

One view which questions the conventional religious interpretation comes from the mouth of the Green Knight. After Gawain has completed his side of the bargain in the beheading game, the Green Knight reveals his real identity--that he is Bercilak. Though the wary reader may have deduced this already, the Green Knight's explanation of his identity contains an added twist to the poem's plot: the Green Knight reveals Morgan le Faye as the agent behind the beheading challenge. He describes the game as a witch's scheme, one originally designed to test Arthur's court and also to scare the Queen. The Green Knight explains:

> 'Ho [Morgan le Faye] wayned me upon this wise to your wynne halle
> For to assay the surquidry, if hit soth were
> That rennes of the grete renoun of the Rounde Table.
> Ho wayned me this wonder your wyttes to reve,
> For to have greved Guenore and gard hir to deye'
> (2456-60).

The Green Knight's explanation undercuts a clearly religious interpretation which Gawain draws from his adventure by introducing magic into the game. To further complicate the matter, the poet presents the court's reaction, which assigns the girdle a significance not clearly aligned with either of the above explanations: the court considers the girdle an emblem of Gawain's heroic stature, and they opt to wear it in honor of him. The many possibilities created by the poet's matter create interpretive paths which can overlap or abruptly meet a dead end.

The presence of conflicting interpretations of the girdle within the text lead to conflicting interpretations of the poem as a whole. The poet cleverly avoids specifically explicating the poem's meaning as it draws to a close. Instead, he presents the various possibilities as aligned with particular characters in the poem. Though the poet spends many lines on Gawain's reaction to the challenge and his return to court, he throws a major stumbling block in this conventional religious path of interpretation. Specifically, the poet attributes the entire game to Morgan le Faye, a detail which requires readers to re-negotiate their whole interpretive game just when they think they are nearing the end and the goal. In other words, the poet's use and abuse of convention confuses the reader's usual paths to meaning.

Martin Stevens' conclusion demonstrates one possible way to reconcile the poem's thematic contradictions, a way which favors the Green Knight's point of view. He asserts that "fair play would demand... that Gawain be given a handicap, and that is what the belt represents" (78). He bases his conclusion on an interpretation which sees the Green Knight's supernatural status as an unfair advantage in his game with Gawain. Seen in this light, Gawain's acceptance of the girdle becomes fair play rather than a violation of it. Unlike Stevens, Charles Muscatine attempts to resolve the poem's meaning by avoiding both Morgan le Faye and religion:

> The challenge of the Green Knight is at once an adventure, a game, and a bargain; its full answer by the hero Gawain is a test of his capacity to play the game according to the bargain or the rules. (61)[15]

According to Muscatine, the meaning of the poem depends upon Gawain's game-playing. When he completes his bargain with the Green Knight, Gawain learns the connection between all the games he has played. The Green Knight's explanation leads Gawain to recognize his sin and determine the new significance of the girdle. Barron describes this moment as Gawain's "moment of truth:"

> A flash of insight brings [Gawain] recognition that the Green Knight and Sir Bercilak are somehow one and the same, that the Christmas 'games' of Camelot and

> Hautdesert are equally serious, that Gawain to fulfill the terms of the one has broken the terms of the other, that his confession was invalid and he stands in spiritual as well as mortal peril.
>
> ("French Romance" 19)

While this "moment of truth" on the horizontal level provides readers with information necessary to their quest for meaning, the end of Gawain's game does not end their game. Instead, readers move to the third tier in order to explore how Gawain's quest pertains to the goal of their literary game.

Like many critics, Muscatine and Barron overlook the significance of the reader's interpretive game in a concern for establishing a coherent meaning for Gawain's game. Barron, however, offers insight to the reader's quest. According to his analysis, the reader's "moral judgement has been as much under test as that of the hero--to detect the moment and cause of his failure" (EMR 172-73). Barron still focuses, however, on the "failure" of Gawain, and not on the success or failure of the reader's game. Barron proceeds to resolve the poem's ambiguity by interpreting the court's reaction as a "trap for unwary readers" ("French Romance" 20). He simplifies the reader's task, implying that the wary reader would share Gawain's, and Barron's, view of the challenge. This conclusion marks the point where Barron's interpretation stops and mine continues. While he

determines that the readers' moral judgment has been "as much under test as that of the hero," he confines the readers' test to a judgment of Gawain. Instead, the poetic game presents a larger challenge. It measures readers' ability to judge how the outcome of Gawain's quest reflects upon their standards of judgment. Success or failure in judgment is the reader's test, and the reader confronts the process necessary to reach this judgment while sifting through the possible meanings in the poem. Thus, readers ultimately judge themselves, not Gawain, in order to determine the outcome of their quest. In other words, Gawain's status in the poem is merely a step from which the reader infers his or her own moral worth.

As Barron explains, Gawain's moment of truth includes his recognition of his "spiritual peril." Gawain learns that death at the hands of the Green Knight is not the greatest danger; instead, the sinful motive which caused him to accept the girdle, hide it from Bercilak, and wear it to his final challenge damages him most. It is not the possession of the girdle that is perilous, but the reason behind that possession. Gawain's situation at this point of insight is analogous to that which the reader may attain by successfully playing the literary game. The reader's game, like Gawain's, contains spiritual peril. When the reader's game is done, the reader's moment of truth represents the knowledge or lesson he takes away from the game. Will his

interpretive choices lead him to a goal valuable enough to be applicable beyond the space and time of the game itself? What leads him to choose one reading over the next? These are some of the questions which characterize the final moves in the reader's game, moves which illustrate the reader's intention to reach sentence. Reed argues that the many choices offered by the poet ultimately shelter the reader from having to choose. He falters from a misunderstanding of the concept of medieval play. He concludes: "The work's self-conscious status as 'play' insulates its audience (as its hero) from the fullest impact of the truth" (152). In other words, Reed ignores the actual "self-conscious" nature of the literary game, that is, its claim to sentence. Both author and reader seek a level of meaning in their game, a truth which gives the game its earnest.

The process of meaning-making is an earnest component of play. It is also an aspect of the literary game which is part of the reader's reality outside the game. On the whole, the combination of earnest and game which characterizes Gawain's adventure is one way in which the poet conveys the interdependence between his literary game and reality, constantly reminding the reader that the literary game can be more than fun. Much critical work attests to the earnest component of game and play, including literary play, the most extensive being Johan Huizinga's classic Homo Ludens. Cook's informative study of SGGK,

which draws upon some of Huizinga's concepts, reveals the poet's awareness of the interplay between earnest and game. He concentrates on evidence in the literal matter. He offers one particularly lucid example which occurs in the early sections of the poem.[16] The poet's description of Arthur emphasizes his youth and jollity:

> Bot Arthur wolde not ete til all were served,
> He was so joly of his joyfnes and sumwhat childgered (85-6).

Arthur desires an interlude between the courses of his feast. In this case, however, this traditional request is more than child's play. The poet lists Arthur's favorite entertainments:

> .....[H]e wolde never ete
> Upon such a dere day ere him devised were
> Of sum aventurus thing an uncouthe tale,
> Of sum mayn mervayl that he myght trowe,
> Of alderes, of armes, of other aventures,
> Auther sum segge him besought of sum siker knight
> To joyne with him in justyng, in jopardy to lay,
> Lede, lif for lif, leve uchone other (91-8).

These lines indicate that Arthur desires "sum aventurus thing" and either an "uncouthe tale" or a fight to the death will suffice. The combination of images juxtaposes more playful entertainment with deadly games, complicating the game-like atmosphere of the opening court with mortal weight.

The poet's combination of serious and comic images continues in larger passages as well, as Barron describes in his analysis of the variation between the harsh, "realistic"

climate of Gawain's travels between courts and castles, and the fantastic and merry character of the castles and courts themselves.[17] A similar combination of opposites occurs when the poet interlaces the vivid violence of the outdoor hunt scenes with the playful atmosphere of the courtly relations between Gawain and the lady in the bedroom. In general, the poem contains games with a varying proportion of earnest and fun; some are life-threatening, while others are harmless.

Like the combination of history and fantasy which opens the poem, much of the matter requires the audience to consider a relationship between earnest and game in their progress toward sentence. One particular horizontal case contains obvious vertical dimensions. The following lines occur just after the images of history which open the poem: The poet describes Britain as a place

> Where werre and wrake and wonder
> By sythes has woned therinne,
> And oft both blysse and blunder
> Ful skete has skyfted synne. (16-19)

The Middle English Dictionary defines blysse and blunder as virtual opposites.[18] The poet's combination of these terms both describes the character of the historical reality he refers to in the above lines, and offers thematic implications: he forecasts the presence of both grief and gladness in the tale of the Green Knight which he is about to begin.

The poet's combination of earnest and game in the horizontal text allows for a varying degree of the two in the poem's vertical dimension. At the close of the poem, readers may resemble certain characters in the poem in the way they attempt to understand the game. Morton Bloomfield offers an interesting analogy which links the poet with Morgan le Faye and the reader with Arthur's court (150). This analogy is only a piece of the puzzle. In the poet's game, readers may play a variety of positions--Gawain, the Green Knight, or the court, for example--depending upon each one's perspective on the poem's meaning. If the reader desires a serious message, Gawain can supply it. If the reader wants an adventure, the court's responses prove a more fitting analogy for their reading experience. In this way the poet's game proves not only flexible to the needs and abilities of its players, but capable of delight and instruction in a combination expressly fit to order.

This is not the whole story, however. After all, it is the desire to make meaning which motivates the reader to play the literary game. This meaning-making gives the game its moral, a moral analogous to that which Gawain gains from his quest. Intention plays a part in the reader's spiritual peril as it does in Gawain's. The reader's "moment of truth" depends upon the effort and the integrity of her interpretive play. The reader must decide for herself whether she has failed, as Gawain did, to see the moral

peril of her game-playing. And if so, has the literary game taught the reader to recognize the moral peril of her interpretive play, as Gawain learned the moral peril of his game? Morally speaking, the reader has not won her game unless the "truth" she obtains through interpretation is earnest enough to carry the lesson beyond the boundaries of the game.

In moving from matter to moral in this large, vertical playing field, readers are responsible for their own interpretive paths. Each choice made represents another one denied. In other words, in negotiating the poet's matter, the readers confront their meaning-making strategies. While choosing between vertical moves, they encounter the limits of those moves, and may learn the necessity of choice and its consequent qualification to any one discoverable truth. The value of the literary game, thus, is not merely the meaning to be gained through interpretation, but an understanding of how interpretation bears upon that meaning.

The poet constructs his game in a way which highlights the process over the product, examining the intimate relationship between the two. Those conventions and beliefs by which the medieval reader played the literary game are, after all, the same as those by which he made sense of the world outside the game. Rather than simply allowing these systems of meaning-making to lead smoothly to understanding, however, the poet plays them against each other. This

interplay forces the diligent reader into a self-conscious realization of the initial freedom, subsequent contradiction, and eventual narrowness of choice which characterizes these systems and, consequently, the reader's experience which relies on them in both game and earnest, in reading and reality. The sentence is more than an application of Gawain's lesson; it is the reader understanding how she has come to understand what Gawain's lesson is; it is a close look at the codes of Christianity and Chivalry which influence Gawain's determination of his flaw and the reader's agreement or disagreement with that determination; it is an examination of the codes that control the reader's interpretation of the text and his own life. Thus, by skillfully playing this literary game, the reader earns moments of truth which illuminate the bridges between the matter and the moral, and reveal that in order to cross some, one must burn others, not always knowing which are the right ones to cross, or the right ones to burn.

Notes

1 Some examples of studies which focus on Gawain's games in SGGK are: R.H. Bowers, "Gawain and the Green Knight as Entertainment," MLQ 24 (1963): 333-41; Robert G. Cook,"The Play Element in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Tulane Studies in English 13 (1963): 5-31; Martin Stevens, "Laughter and Game in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum 47 (1972): 65-78; Gloria Torrini-Roblin, "Gomen and Gab: Two Models for Play in Medieval Literature," RPh 38.1 (1984): 32-40.

2 D.W. Robertson Jr., Preface to Chaucer (Princeton, 1962) 292. He defines these terms as follows: "Those [meaningful implications] which referred to the Church were called allegorical; those which pertained to the spiritual constitution of the individual were called tropological; and those which referred to the afterlife were called anagogical." Robertson's study theorizes about how the educated reader approached and understood texts. By studying Biblical exegesis as performed by medieval theologians, Robertson reaches a conclusion which argues for the relevance of Christian methods in analyzing secular texts.

3 A.J. Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship (Philadelphia, 1988) 10. Minnis defines auctor as both "author" and "authority" in medieval terms: "writer and authority, someone not merely to be read but to be respected and believed." The modern attempt to kill the author in recent times testifies to the difference a few centuries can make in critical theory.

4 Glending Olson, Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages (Ithaca, 1982) 103. Olson's main concern, however, is to argue against the Robertsonian school, which applies strict Christian interpretation to secular medieval literature. In order to do this he studies samples of medieval literature which fundamentally deny any other purpose than entertainment. Nevertheless, chapter one, entitled "Medieval Attitudes Toward Literary Pleasure," provides an informative introduction to the Christian approach and its classical ancestor, Horace, admitting that the "highest" literature did instruct as well as delight.

5 C.S. Lewis, The Discarded Image (Cambridge, 1964) 152-4.

6 W.R.J. Barron, English Medieval Romance (New York, 1987) 5. Barron gives credit to Pamela Gradon, author of Form and Style in Early English Literature (London, 1974) for this particular terminology.

7 See the notes to The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript, Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds. (Berkeley, 1978) 230.

8 Notes 34-36, 39, 50, 52, and 55 to Blanch's article give sources of studies concerning the significance of colors in medieval literature and folklore.

9 On accusations against the matter of Britain as lies, see Lee W. Patterson's article, "The Historiography of Romance and the Alliterative Morte Arthure," 9-10, where he discusses, internalia, Chretien de Troyes' playing with the superiority of poetic truth to historic truth.

10 Cook 7. Cook discusses the contrast between history and fantasy in the opening images of the poem in order to support his analysis of how the poet mingles comedy and menace in a way which creates tension but, more importantly, promotes humor.

11 Augustine in De Doctrina Christiana 2.9.14 (Robertson 42) and Hue of St. Victor in Didascalicon 6:2-3 (Taylor 135-39) both testify to the practice wherein the reader first completes the reading of the text then returns to the beginning in order to view the whole for interpretive purposes.

12 W.R.J. Barron, "French Romance and the Structure of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Studies in Medieval Literature and Language eds. W. Rothwell et al (New York, 1973) 7-25. Barron's interpretation of the arming scenes (20-21) contributes to his larger reading of the poem, which argues that the reader must determine the real nature of Gawain's success or failure if he wishes to conclude a reading of the poem.

13 Stevens 72-74. Stevens offers an interesting discussion of courtly love and hunting manuals as sources for the poet. It contains many details which show the poet's knowledge of these conventions, especially with regard to the hunt scenes.

14 Morton W. Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, 1970) 131-57. This chapter contains a good summary of the conventional Christian reading of SGGK which provides more detail than my purposes here require.

15 Charles Muscatine, Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer (Notre Dame, 1972) 61. Muscatine is primarily

concerned with how the poem contains an abundant energy within an orderly and artistic form. His larger interest is in determining how such art forms, and the games they contain, illustrate the ordering of society, and the confinement of chaos within a code of rules; that is, the use of game and play as ordered chaos.

16 Cook examines the depiction of the opening scene to show that all kinds of games--harmful or not--were considered entertainment at Arthur's court. His purpose is to uncover the court's attitude towards aventure, and he concludes that both fun and dangerous games were equally welcomed at Arthur's court. He does not consider the implication of the combination of such earnest and game for the poet's game.

17 For a detailed discussion see Barron's English Medieval Romance, Chapter seven entitled "The Matter of Britain," 166-73.

18 The MED defines blysse as "a happy condition of existence; well-being, prosperity, good fortune." It defines blunder as coming from blonder meaning "disturbance, strife; trouble, distress."

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VITA

Judy Cicatko

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, on January 13, 1964. Attended elementary school at Providence Heights Alpha, a private Catholic school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Relocated to Virginia Beach, Virginia in 1977. Graduated as Salutatorian from First Colonial High School in 1982. Earned a Bachelor of Arts degree, with a concentration in English, from the College of William and Mary in 1986. Attended Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, for courses in the certification program for Secondary English in 1988-89. Completed requirements for the Master of Arts degree in English at the College of William and Mary in August, 1990. Employed during the school year 1989-90 as a tutor in the Writing Resources Center at the College of William and Mary. Will be employed as an adjunct instructor in the fall of 1990, teaching freshman composition at the College of William and Mary, Virginia Commonwealth University, and the University of Richmond.